

The Presence of Mr. Wang

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THE one character in *Victory* most consistently overlooked by Conrad's critics is Wang, the Chinese laborer turned servant who shares the island with Heyst. Indeed, of all those who have written of the book, only Robert F. Haugh, in his recent study, has more than an occasional word for him;¹ and even here, one feels, this regard is the result less of a conviction of Wang's significance, than of Haugh's particular method of detailed recapitulation. In any event, neither he nor any one else has attempted to provide an adequate measure of Wang's function in the total pattern of *Victory*. This general neglect I find especially puzzling: first, because the number of people on Samburan is so limited that each might be expected to contribute meaningfully to the context and therefore to warrant close tracking, and secondly, because even an initial reading reveals that Wang does, in fact, play a prominent rôle in the novel. It is he, we recall, who gains immediate attention by choosing to remain with Heyst; who is the first to sense the threat embodied in Jones and Company; who appropriates the revolver; who deserts Heyst's side of Samburan; who helps establish the final terms of the crisis by refusing Heyst and Lena sanctuary; who disposes of Pedro (and possibly, by inadvertence, of Jones); and who in the end gains unquestioned mastery of the whole island. It would seem only reasonable, then, to wonder about Mr. Wang's presence, to speculate about his position in the book.

We first meet him in conversation with Heyst: he has taken to wife an indigenous Alfuro ("a shy, wild creature"), and now seeks permission to settle on the island. Heyst, slightly bemused but on the whole indifferent, contracts to accept him as general houseboy. And then almost immediately we are told of this occurrence:

1. *Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1957), pp. 111, 112, 114.

BOSTON UNIVERSITY STUDIES IN ENGLISH

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Published quarterly. Yearly subscription (4 numbers) \$4.00, price of single numbers \$1.25. Copyright, 1960, by the Trustees of Boston University. Printed by The Stinehour Press, Lunenburg, Vermont.

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The Chinaman had found several packets of seeds in the storerooms, and had surrendered to an irresistible impulse to put them into the ground. He would make his master pay for the vegetables which he was raising to satisfy his instinct. And, looking silently at the silent Wang going about his work in the bungalow in his unhasty, steady way, Heyst envied the Chinaman's obedience to his instincts, the powerful simplicity of purpose which made his existence appear almost automatic in the mysterious precision of its facts. (p. 171)²

This passage is significant on two accounts: it not only provides the essential clue to Wang's character, but also points to the quality of his relationship with Heyst. The latter, in the pose he favors, stands on as spectator, but not quite the indifferent spectator. For observing Wang intently at work, he experiences the foreign emotion of envy, one of those responses he is presumably above; and it is envy of Wang's peculiar ability to heed his "instincts" (the word is twice repeated here; for good measure we are told Wang "surrendered to an irresistible impulse"), and by such "obedience" to achieve "simplicity of purpose" and an existence "almost automatic." In other words, Heyst, detached, unable to act, sees in Wang his opposite, all that he himself is not and can hardly be. And the awareness takes root: it is curious how virtually from the very start Heyst feels himself vaguely subordinate to Wang and submits silently to his dominance. There is, for example, the trivial affair of the keys: "After a time Heyst perceived that Wang had annexed all the keys. Any key left lying about vanished after Wang had passed that way. Subsequently some of them . . . were returned. . . . Heyst said nothing. Wang also said nothing" (pp. 169-170). There is the matter of firing the grass without Heyst's prior consent, and his remark to Lena on the occasion: "He's the whole establishment, you see. I told you I hadn't even a dog to keep me company here" (p. 172). Significantly, though these two incidents are separated in time by at least six months, Conrad's time scheme enables him to present them within three pages, as though they had occurred in sequence, and within five pages of our introduction to Wang. The immediate effect is that of intensifying our impression of Wang's independence and, further, of suggesting a latent aggressiveness at variance with Heyst's usual passivity.

Such events as these are confessedly of little account in themselves, but they do indicate the psychological balance, and therefore the re-

2. All page references to *Platypus* are, for convenience, to the Modern Library edition.

lationship, existing between the two men. Formally, Heyst is master and Wang servant; in actuality, their relationship is, if not the reverse of this, then something entirely different. For Heyst has come to feel that where he is ignorant or incompetent, Wang is neither. Hence, when Wang makes known his intention to depart, Heyst inquires why, hoping, not to dissuade him, but rather to discover (Wang is apparently equipped to know) the nature of his own and Lena's danger: "through his mind flashed the hope that something enlightening might come from that being so unlike himself, taking contact with the world with a simplicity and directness of which his own mind was not capable" (p. 290). So also, as the final crisis approaches and Heyst senses more and more his inadequacy in treating with the unholy three, his thoughts shift suddenly to Wang—there, he is certain, are adequacy and protection: "I must—yes, I must speak to Wang. We shall go and seek that man, who knows what he wants and how to secure what he wants. We will go at once!" (p. 309). Even granting the edge of irony in Heyst's tone, his appraisal remains constant: Wang is the one to consult, for in his own way, by virtue of his forthright, highly competent estimate of the world, of his own needs, and of how to satisfy them, he partakes of a knowledge and experience from which Heyst realizes that he is totally excluded. Put in its barest terms: Heyst, in his felt impotence, looks upon Wang as both knowing and able.

Though Heyst sees Wang in this fashion, we, of course, are not obliged to. There is always the chance that Conrad is being ironic, that Heyst has imputed these qualities to his servant and his judgment is consequently ill-founded. Our legitimate recourses are to the comments of the narrator, who by the time Wang appears has become omniscient,³ and to Wang's own conduct. The narrator's picture is somewhat more rounded than Heyst's, but in substance it is surprisingly alike. Wang is "practical and automatic" (p. 173), and his movements reveal "unerring precision" (p. 179). So adept is he at his job, that he generally "materialised without a sound, unheard, uncalled, and did his office" (p. 206); "the absolute soundlessness of the operation, gave it something of the quality of a conjuring trick" (p. 179). His personal world is carefully ordered and intelligible:

3. The shift from partial to total perspective occurs in Part II; Wang first appears in Part III.

"Wang not only knew how to live according to conventional proprieties, but had strong personal views as to the manner of arranging his domestic existence" (p. 169). Each day, for example, he dutifully "went back to her [the Alfuro woman] at the first fall of dusk, vanishing from the bungalow suddenly at this hour," not to reappear until morning (p. 170). When he does desert, it is, we are told, from the threat of disorder, from the "uncertainties of the relations which were going to establish themselves between those white men" (p. 290). His mind in all this is "very clear" but limited—"not far-reaching"; and he determines it "according to the plain reason of things, such as it appeared to him in the light of his simple feeling for self-preservation." Nor, finally, are his decisions influenced by "any notions of romantic honour or tender conscience" (p. 287), though he is visibly moved at the moment of his break with Heyst.⁴ In short, from the narrator's view, Wang is the same unsophisticated creature of instinct, habit, and experience that Heyst apprehends.

Wang's conduct in no way belies this portrait subscribed to by both Heyst and the narrator. His first act, we have seen, is to acquire a mate; his second, to get to work—serving Heyst, planning a garden, clearing the land. In all this, driven by his instincts, he is the very figure of purposeful activity. Understandable, then, is his complete removal from Heyst's philosophy of negation; indeed, at one point the symbol of Heyst's mode⁵ literally gives way to that of Wang's: "he cocked his head slightly at the profile of Heyst's father ['a novel impression . . . he acknowledged by cocking his head slightly' (p. 174)], pen in hand above a white sheet of paper on a crimson tablecloth; and, moving forward noiselessly, began to clear away the breakfast things" (pp. 178–179). After a brief appraisal, he turns from the picture to his assigned duty, the dishes. The fact is simply that Wang has come to terms with his surroundings, and so long as this reconciliation is in effect, his instincts find harmonious expression and he functions as the good citizen, conscious of his interests, fulfilling

4. "His almond-shaped eyes imparted to his face an expression of . . . melancholy. The muscles of his throat moved visibly while he uttered a distinct and guttural, 'Good-bye,' and vanished from Number One's sight" (pp. 292–293).

5. The significance of the portrait of the elder Heyst is several times made clear. Heyst tells Lena: "Primarily the man with the quill pen in his hand in that picture you so often look at is responsible for my existence. He is also responsible for what my existence is, or rather has been" (p. 185).

his obligations, hoping for no more than his due. As Davidson finds occasion to remark: "He's not a bad Chinaman" (p. 383).⁶

But Wang's adjustment is short lived. The moment his world is threatened, as it is by the arrival of Jones and Company, one hitherto lulled instinct, self-preservation, disturbs the balance he has achieved and thereafter determines his behavior. Nor is this new imbalance other than it should be: the "plain reason of things" (Wang's analysis of his experience) demands it. His previous experience had been varied and extensive, and he had seen many "wild men," "people who live in trees—savages no better than animals." But Pedro is beyond these, "altogether beyond his conception of anything that could be looked upon as human." Wang realizes that alone he could not possibly withstand this creature; Heyst's revolver, lying idly in the drawer, becomes his logical means of defense (pp. 290–291).⁷ Similarly, hearing the scuffling of Lena and Ricardo behind the curtain thoroughly jolts him: his eyes "remained still, dead still, and his impassive yellow face grew all at once careworn, and lean with the sudden strain of intense, doubtful, frightened watchfulness. Contrary impulses swayed his body, rooted to the floor-mats" (p. 271). All, he sees, is out of joint, his world beyond repair; to preserve himself he has no choice but to escape. Precisely the same motive that causes his departure precludes the opening of his new world to Heyst and Lena—fear of risking, as Heyst reports, "a rude and distasteful contest with the strange barbarians for my sake." To protect himself, he is willing to go so far as to threaten to shoot Heyst with his own gun, "without any sort of compunction" (p. 325).

It is not Heyst, however, but Pedro whom he shoots. Davidson's

6. Davidson's evaluation is important in that it underscores the distinction between Wang and Ricardo, the other creature of instinct who serves as Wang's immediate opposite, i.e., secretary to Jones, as Wang is servant to Heyst. Wang grows, of course, by the comparison, and is brought by it yet further into the central current of good citizenry. Cf. the narrator's earlier comment: "Wang in his native province in China might have been an aggressively, sensitively genial person; but in Samburan he had clothed himself in a mysterious stolidity . . ." (p. 170).

7. Several critics have noted the rather obvious symbolical value of Heyst's loss of the gun; typical is Gustav Morf's suggestion that it is "but a symbol for the loss of his will-power" (*Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* [London: Sampson Low, 1930], p. 178). To pause here, however, is to neglect the fact that the transference is from Heyst to Wang, that Heyst's symbolical loss must be Wang's symbolical gain. Wang does show subsequently that the gun has fallen into hands that can properly employ it.

notice of the event is typical of that good man, and also, in its consciousness, true to the essential Mr. Wang:

... it occurred to him that he had better cast the boat adrift, for fear those scoundrels should come round by water and bombard the village from the sea with their revolvers and Winchesters. He judged that they were devils enough for anything. So he walked down the wharf quietly; and as he got into the boat, to cast her off, that hairy man who, it seems, was dozing in her, jumped up growling, and Wang shot him dead. Then he shoved the boat off as far as he could and went away. (p. 384)

No pussyfooting here: Pedro rises and Wang quite properly puts him down. Instinct makes its demands and is satisfied. Can the reader avoid contrasting Heyst's failure to act amidst circumstances not basically dissimilar?

Backed hard against the wall, [Jones] no longer watched Heyst. He had the air of a man who had seen an abyss yawning under his feet.

"If I want to kill him, this is my time," thought Heyst; but he did not move. (p. 362)

Or again, a little further on:

At this moment, by simply shouldering Mr. Jones, he could have thrown him down and put himself by a couple of leaps beyond the certain aim of the revolver; but he did not even think of that. His very will seemed dead of weariness. (p. 366)

The two openings prove crucial: had Heyst responded to either, the ensuing calamity might very well have been averted. But Heyst remains utterly true to himself, and the occasions pass. Opportunity without the instinct to act amounts, in the end, to no opportunity at all.

That Wang was designed as a foil to Heyst is, I think, clear. As Miss Bradbrook noted some time ago, "by his relation to the other characters, Heyst is 'placed' and valued."⁸ In this sense, Wang's presence is indispensable. By defining, he not only places Heyst's inactivity and lack of direction, but also, it seems to me, provides along with Lena a most necessary measure to Heyst's way of life. On one level, of course, he is so distinctly Heyst's inferior as to make any comparison between them only barely operative. For it is apparent that all of Heyst's qualities that we choose to prize and honor, his innate deli-

8. M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1941), p. 64.

cacy, his extreme moral fastidiousness, his revulsion from violence, are completely alien to Wang, the man of instinct, who could never possibly probe himself in this, the Heystian, manner:

But what about that crowbar? Suppose I had it! Could I stand in ambush at the side of the door—this door—and smash the first protruding head, scatter blood and brains over the floor, over these walls, and then run stealthily to the other door to do the same thing—and repeat the performance for a third time, perhaps? Could I? On suspicion, without compunction, with a calm and determined purpose? No, it is not in me. I date too late. Would you like to see me attempt this thing...

Then immediately after, the final, telling qualification:

"And who knows if it isn't really my duty?" he began again... "It may be—my duty to you, to myself. For why should I put up with the humiliation of their secret menaces?" (pp. 338–339)

This readiness to probe, to search out the manifold bearings of a given situation, shows Heyst at his best, at the height of his moral awareness; to compare him at this point with Wang is to be thoroughly impressed with his attributes and with the extent of Wang's limitations.

But in the context of the book such a contrast is, after all, secondary, almost superfluous; Wang's presence is hardly necessary to convince us of the essential value of Heyst's qualities. Schomberg has unwittingly administered that service, as has Heyst himself in, say, his relationship with the unfortunate Morrison, his rescue of Lena, his initial hospitality to Jones and his henchmen. It is rather, as I have been implying, on another level, as a qualifying or corrective force, that Wang's position as foil achieves its full effect. Of particular relevance is Conrad's own stricture on Heyst: "... in his fine detachment [he] had lost the habit of asserting himself. I don't mean the courage of self-assertion, either moral or physical, but the mere way of it, the trick of the thing, the readiness of mind and turn of the hand that come without reflection and lead the man to excellence in life, in art, in crime, in virtue and for the matter of that, even in love."⁹ Heyst's detachment has cost him precisely those qualities that we have found most characteristic of Wang: the "habit" of assertion, the "way," the "trick," the instinctive "turn of the hand"; and has cost him, therefore, the possibility of excelling in whatever activity he may attempt,

9. "Author's Note," p. x.

as the broad and splendidly amoral catalogue—life-art, crime-virtue, even love—makes clear.

The truth is that though Conrad sympathizes with his hero, he gifts that sympathy with qualifications; as much as he predicates his vision upon the necessity and worthiness of Heystian uncertainty, he at the same time insists that that vision encompass and credit what Wang, no less than Lena, represents. We have seen how by variously pointing up the Heyst-Wang antithesis he has obliged us to account for this opposing element. And then he concludes the book by again drawing on the contrast, but now in such a way as clearly to imply the working out of a retributive pattern. On the one hand, we are told—with almost ritualistic overtones—of Heyst consumed in flames: "Let Heaven look after what has been purified. The wind and rain will take care of the ashes" (p. 384); on the other, we have Wang emerging from the forest, ready to take charge of his new dominion. The disparity in their fates is not only impressive, but, given what has preceded, both inevitable and appropriate. Heyst, overburdened by the immensity of his failure, is left with no alternative but the one he takes. Lena is dead, principally because of his mistakes, his insufficiency ("I suppose he couldn't stand his thoughts before her dead body," says Davidson [p. 383]); his sole commitment is to death, for even were he truly regenerated by her sacrifice, he possesses no other tie adequate to compel his survival. Indeed, it is as though Conrad had necessitated his suicide by having carefully refrained from charting an area of activity for him subsequently to enter upon. Wang's fate is equally deserved and prepared for. Having remained on Samarang originally by the grace of Heyst, he has endured, by virtue of his abilities, to inherit sway over it. We have seen him work sedulously at its soil, marry into its folk, become instrumental in ridding it of its invaders: who more than he, we ask, has a claim to, has merited the island? And he will, we are earlier assured, make an effective ruler: "He has preached to the villagers. They respect him. He is the most remarkable man they have ever seen, and their kinsman by marriage. They understand his policy" (p. 325).

Wang, then, has a distinct victory of his own. To be sure, it differs from Lena's, and its fruits are of another quality. But it, too, is integral to the pattern of the book, and in essentially the same way that Lena's is, as a commentary on the inadequacies of Heyst's way of life. From Lena we learn several things, the virtues, for example, of sacri-

fice and fidelity, but most of all she teaches us (by teaching Heyst) to lament "the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life" (p. 383). Though it is obvious that Wang does not himself stand for the good life, his presence nonetheless enforces and extends this lesson by pointing up the basic hopelessness, in face of the often crude demands of the world, consequent upon just such a distrust. Lena had countered this distrust by committing herself gloriously to life almost in the act of death. Wang counters it through a similar dedication, although in his case, lacking as he does "any notions of romantic honour or tender conscience," commitment takes a different form, one in which he is constantly alert to, indeed often cowed by, the dangers everywhere about. If of the two we tend naturally to prefer Lena's way, we at the same time are likely to concede typicality to Wang's. The important point, however, is that in conjunction they provide us with alternate modes of response, both of which represent ways into life and therefore distinct affirmations of life. The difficulty with Heyst is that he has been unable to follow either path, neither the singular nor the common, for in accommodating, he has been crippled by, the nihilism so clearly and economically expressed in his father's last, imposing words, "Look on—make no sound" (p. 165). It is in terms of this latter philosophy, as essential correctives to it, that Lena and Wang, each in his fashion, perform.

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